

# GENDERED VIOLENCE

PARKVILLE, NAARM

# 11-13 FEB



A Conference by The Wesley Centre  
sponsored by Pilgrim Theological College

## Plenary Sessions (Yuma Auditorium)

*These sessions will be followed by time for Q and A*

### 1. What is gender? (Panel)

A panel discussing the way gender is talked about theologically and in sociology and why it matters. It will address biblical and theological ways of talking about gender.

*Moderator: Dr Rosie Clare Shorter, The University of Melbourne*

*Panelists: Monica Melancthon (University of Divinity), Geoff Thompson (University of Divinity), Steff Fenton (Author, speaker and advocate)*

**Day 1.**

11 Feb @  
11:00 am

### 2. Is Religion Dangerous for Women? Mapping the Landscape. (Panel)

This panel includes four snapshots of research that show the prevalence of violence in faith communities as we seek to 'map' the realities facing us as faith communities.

*Moderator: Rosie Clare Shorter*

*Panelists: Prof. Sarah Wend (The University of Melbourne), Dr Ruth Powel (NCLS Research), Sara Muzamil (Jesuit Refugee Service), Prof Timothy Jones (La Trobe University)*

**Day 1.**

11 Feb @  
7:00 pm

### 3. Gendered Violence and Biblical Texts (Keynote)

A keynote lecture by Dr Emily Colgan, exploring how we handle the Bible's bloody texts. Emily is an Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible and co-host of *The Bloody Bible* podcast and co-director of *The Shiloh Project*.

*Moderator: Liz Boase*

**Day 2.**

12 Feb @  
9:30 am

### 4. Eroticising Inequality: Pornography, young people, and sexuality (Keynote)

A keynote lecture by Maree Crabbe, Director of the Australian violence prevention initiative, *It's time we talked*, and expert in the way pornography is forming young people's ideas of sex where violence is normative.

*Moderator: Robyn Whitaker*

*Theological Response: Erin Martine Hutton (Australian University of Theology)*

**Day 2.**

12 Feb @  
4:15 pm

### 5. What about forgiveness? (Panel)

A panel discussing theologies of forgiveness, the positive role forgiveness can play and the problems of 'cheap grace' in pressuring survivors to stay.

*Moderator: Robyn Whitaker*

*Panelists: Charissa Suli (President Uniting Church Australia); Rachel Kronberger (Minister, Wesley Church), Naomi Wolfe (Australian Catholic University); Safina Stewart (Artist)*

**Day 3.**

13 Feb @  
2:00 pm

## Workshops

*Workshops are opt-in and run alongside other short papers options. The ones marked with an asterisk are particularly recommended for ministry candidates, chaplains, and ministers.*

<p><b>1. Introduction to family and domestic violence – Dr Erin Martine Hutton *</b></p> <p>This workshop is aimed at candidates and ministry agents less familiar with DFV. It will outline the various ways violence can manifest in families (spiritual, financial, physical, sexual, psychological) and what we know about drivers and conditions where violence can flourish. It serves as an introduction to the conference.</p>	<p><b>Day 1.</b></p> <p>11 Feb @ 4:00 pm</p> <p>90 mins</p>
<p><b>2. Pastor Sexual Exploitation of Adult Congregation Members (or, Don't Call it an Affair) – Jaime Simpson *</b></p> <p>This interactive, trauma- and abuse-informed workshop introduces the Pastor Sexual Exploitation Framework, developed from the lived experiences of adults sexually abused by pastors in Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian communities in Australia. Drawing on findings from 33 survivors, the workshop explores core areas: institutional messages that give rise to grooming tactics, sexual victimisation, post-abuse maintenance strategies and the significant injuries that result for the victim-survivor.</p>	<p><b>Day 2.</b></p> <p>12 Feb @ 11:15 am</p> <p>55 mins</p>
<p><b>3. Transgender Healing for Gender Binary Violence – Steff Fenton</b></p> <p>It is substantially proven that one of the core drivers of violence against women is strict definitions of gender, i.e. man/masculinity and woman/femininity. In this workshop, we will build the concept of 'gender binary violence' as something which harms men, women, trans and queer people. We will also explore its antidote, 'gender expansiveness' which is a core quality of God. For the church to prevent gendered inequality and harm, it must embrace and learn from gender expansive people and build a theology that celebrates them.</p>	<p><b>Day 2.</b></p> <p>12 Feb @ 2:45 pm</p> <p>55 mins</p>
<p><b>4. Preventing Pornography's harms in theory and practice – Maree Crabbe</b></p> <p>Preventing pornography's harms to children and young people is no small task. It requires multiple, coordinated strategies with input from a wide range of stakeholders. In this workshop, Maree will build on the themes from her keynote to explore what we can do to tackle the influence of the multi-billion-dollar global industry that is shaping contemporary sexual norms and contributing to a rise in sexual harm.</p>	<p><b>Day 3.</b></p> <p>13 Feb @ 9:30 am</p> <p>90 mins</p>
<p><b>5. To Forgive or Not to Forgive that is the Question - Elizabeth Lee *</b></p> <p>Forgiveness is seen as a Christian virtue if not an imperative. But as Marina Cantacuszio notes: "Forgiveness is hotly contested territory – contentious, risky, messy, misunderstood and potentially divisive." This 90-minute workshop will explore how theologies of forgiveness can contribute to and counter cultures of gendered-based violence and other abuses of power. It uses the method of 'contemplative dialogue'.</p>	<p><b>Day 3.</b></p> <p>13 Feb @ 11:30 am</p> <p>90 mins</p>

## Short Papers

Short papers are 20-25 minutes with time for questions and will be clustered by themes.

### Short Papers: Session 1a (3 papers)

**1) "A missionary, his friends and a slave girl walk into a public space", but what really happens next in Acts 16:16-18? – Rev. Wendy Elson, Phd Candidate**

The story of the slave-girl is contained in only 3 verses. She functions as a comedic 'plot device', and a narrative block who prevents Paul from moving toward his destination. Male violence is perpetrated on this young slave-girl, forcibly violated with no regard to consent in what is often described as an act of healing on this girl whose vulnerabilities are often ignored. Her story lends the men greater authority, but she is silenced and removed from the narrative. Yet it is she who is the proclaimer of the gospel and it is her capacity for truth-telling which causes her to become a target. This violent act in the open marketplace is a familiar story to people (particularly women) with disabilities and I will explore the slave-girl's story alongside some of the stories told to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of people with disabilities. Strong but dark themes emerge from this narrative, and this paper will seek to highlight current stories of the experience of violence in public spaces for people with disabilities, and challenge, liberate and refocus traditional readings of this Biblical text.

**2) Safe Households in the Gospel of Luke - Rev Dr Margaret Wesley (Anglican Diocese of Southern Queensland)**

Findings from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, and the NAFVP report into family violence within my own (Anglican) tradition, challenge Australian theological scholars to provide our institutions and families with Biblical analysis that better supports safe, healthy relationships at home and in church. As a contribution toward that effort, this paper will consider dangers faced by people of faith at home and in churches through the lens of Luke 10:38-42 and surrounding passages. What dangers could Mary face as she submits to her rabbi rather than to her household leader? What guardrails might assure Mary and her sister that Mary's life of vulnerable discipleship will be marked by safety and respect, rather than by abuse? Placement of this household scene immediately after the Good Samaritan parable (Luke 10:25-37) brings into the home our sense of the violence and indifference of the road. Since readers have considered discipleship and mission in Luke 10:1-24, the locations of potential violence in Luke 10 can be understood as both literal and metaphorical for followers of Jesus – dangers travelling the physical road and travelling 'the way of the Lord'; dangers in the Christian household and in the household of faith.

**3) The "prince of this world" (Jn 12:31) is alive and well: A Cis-gender, white, mid'aged male wonders out loud about a theology of culture in a time of cultural enslavement.- Jamie Calder SJ**

This short paper presentation seeks to briefly examine the origin and operations of power in culture (and cultural processes) that enable faith-based and Church organisations to act in ways antithetical to the Christian Gospel of Jesus Christ: What do Christian disciples draw on to exclude, oppress and control both non-Christian and Christian disciples? It will do so by examining the hermeneutical and larger theological narratives drawn on and the processes through these narratives are deployed to produce particular identities either problematic or otherwise. Thus, the paper will suggest an implicit theology of culture, examining also the neuro-psychological processes that limit wholeness and human freedom in the context of that theology of culture. The paper will touch on the importance of communal discernment as an antidote to destructive ways of identifying that promote violence and abuse, whilst asking questions about the place of free will, human reason, and sin..

Day 1.

11 Feb  
4:00 to  
5:30 pm

Chair:  
Liam  
Miller

Short  
Papers  
1a

**Short Papers: Session 1b - Panel****Complaint, Gender and Power: Disclosing Abuse in Church Contexts**

1. *Dr Tracy McEwan, Australian Catholic University*
2. *Dr Kathleen Phillips, University of Newcastle*
3. *Dr Rocio Figueroa Alvear, Catholic Theological College, Auckland & Lisa Spriggs, Laidlaw College*

This panel examines how gendered power dynamics shape the processes and consequences of making complaints about abuse within church institutions. Despite complaints being potential pathways to justice, survivors have frequently been marginalised, silenced, or discredited. Bringing together theological, sociological, historical, and cross-cultural perspectives, the panel highlights how institutional practices influence whose voices are heard — and whose are suppressed. Paper 1 – Tracy McEwan: Complaint as Resistance in Catholic Contexts. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's feminist account of complaint, this paper explores how gendered and disciplinary power structures shape Catholic complaint-making. McEwan shows how women's complaints can act as resistance while also exposing them to institutional mechanisms that deflect, silence, or delegitimise their experiences. Paper 2 – Kathleen McPhillips: Public Inquiries as Sites of Complaint. This paper analyses major public inquiries in Australia, the UK, and New Zealand as state-authorised forms of complaint. It examines how these inquiries validated survivor testimony, exposed institutional failures, and developed differing methodologies for addressing gendered experiences of abuse within religious settings. Paper 3 – Rocio Figueroa & Lisa Spriggs: Silence and Complaint Among African Religious Sisters. Based on qualitative interviews, this paper investigates how African religious sisters navigate sexual abuse and institutional disbelief. It explores silence as both a protective strategy and an act of resistance, highlighting how women negotiate resilience and justice within contexts shaped by clericalism and gendered power.

Day 1.

11 Feb  
4:00 to  
5:30 pmChair:  
Emily  
ColganShort  
Papers  
1b**Short Papers: Session 2a (3 papers)**

- 1) **Knowing and Not Knowing: The Pursuit of Certainty as a Resistance to Good Work.** - *Dr Cath McKinney, University of Divinity*

A primary question present for me in the context of my role is "what gets in the way of people doing good work — together?" The Royal commission into Institutional responses to Child abuse in Australia exposed the shocking presence of systemic Child abuse within the context of institutions that have been thought about – historically, as trustworthy. The reality that vulnerable people were and are put at risk within our faith communities continues to be experienced as a living and present violence. Drawing on Wilfrid Bion's concept of 'hatred of task,' the Winnicottian posture of 'good enough,' and a Feminist framing of collaboration as discipline, this paper will address my working hypothesis that: A retreat into (the fantasy of) certainty is a response to the very real and present danger of being in a state of un-knowing. This state of unknowing is getting in the way of 'good work' and is contributing to an existence measured by binaries where collaborative endeavour is understood as working in agreement rather than an alignment to the service of a purpose.

- 2) **Decolonising Theology on Aboriginal Lands: Aboriginal Women's Wisdom Amid Violence, Faith, and Renewal.** - *Naomi Wolfe (University of Divinity)*

Doing theology on Aboriginal lands requires deep attentiveness to Country, Spirit, and people, as well as a willingness to confront the legacies of colonial Christianity that continue to shape church and theological practice. This paper reflects on both the challenges and opportunities that arise when theology is undertaken in multicultural and settler colonial contexts, where diverse traditions, spiritualities, and epistemologies intersect. In particular, it explores the complex intersections between theology, culture, and gendered violence, with a focus on how these dynamics have been experienced by Aboriginal women. Too often, theological

Day 2.

12 Feb  
11:15 to  
1:15 pmChair:  
Tanya  
RichesShort  
Papers  
2a

institutions and church structures have participated in violence—through dispossession, silencing of women's voices, denial of cultural authority, and complicity in policies that controlled Aboriginal women's bodies and families. At the same time, Aboriginal women have resisted, reimagined, and renewed theological spaces, drawing on faith, culture, and community to speak life and truth into the church. By naming the histories of violence while also attending to stories of Aboriginal survival and creativity, this paper seeks to contribute to a decolonising theological practice that honours Aboriginal women's wisdom, challenges entrenched hierarchies, and imagines a more just and faithful future for the church in this land. It seeks to invite reflection, decolonisation, and renewal from wider society.

### 3) Reclaiming Matriarchal Wisdom – *Ballina Gee*

The legacy of colonialism not only imposed patriarchal systems over Indigenous cultures but also systemically undermined women's voices, leadership, and sacred roles across faith communities. Within religious institutions, matriarchal values are centered on reciprocity, communal care, and shared guardianship were suppressed in favour of doctrines and structures that privileged male authority. This session will focus on how women can lead the restoration of matriarchal culture that is rooted in Indigenous wisdom and Christian faith within institutional religious life.

## Short Papers: Session 2b (3 papers)

### 1) Towards Understanding FGM: Cultural, Health and Human Rights Perspectives. - *Sara Muzamil (Jesuit Refugee Service)*

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), also known as female circumcision, remains a global human rights concern affecting an estimated 52 million women and girls worldwide, including approximately 53,000 survivors currently living in Australia. While widely condemned as a violation of human rights, FGM is still upheld by some communities as a deeply rooted cultural practice that has persisted for centuries. Historical evidence suggests FGM dates back to Ancient Egypt around 450 BC, predating both the Bible and the Quran, and transcending religious boundaries. The World Health Organization categorizes FGM into four types, ranging from partial clitoral removal to extensive excision and infibulation, with rationales often framed around rites of passage, family honor, hygiene, virginity preservation, and social acceptance. Once thought to be confined to Africa, FGM has been documented in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and South America, and continues to spread through global migration. In Western countries, where the practice is illegal, some families attempt to evade detection by arranging the procedure abroad. However, disclosure often occurs through healthcare providers, educators, or peers, underscoring the need for strengthened legal frameworks, culturally informed interventions, and community-led advocacy. This presentation examines the historical, cultural, and contemporary dimensions of FGM, highlighting its persistence and the challenges it poses in both local and global contexts.

### 2) The Silent Word: Language, Apathy and the Catholic Church - *Angela Marquis*

The Word of God, eternal and fleeting, omnipresent and embodied, sacrosanct and butchered, invariable yet translated again and again. The words we hear proclaimed from our lectionary, the altar, in prayer, in petition have long been uttered with reverence: indeed, they have the power to move the spirit. This paper explores the underlying misogyny, power and control that this embedded belief structure elides. For many, the church's rather insipid acknowledgement of the struggle for inclusion and truth within sacred texts is simply a failure to modernise or align itself with secular culture. Yet, who and what does this perpetual repetition of a mistranslated and misunderstood Word serve? At what point will the systemic contempt for the great majority of the faithful be understood as the driver for enduring gendered violence in the church and beyond?

Short  
Papers

2a

Day 2.

12 Feb

11:15 to  
1:15 pm

Chair:  
Kylie  
Crabbe

Short  
Papers 2b

**3) Transforming Taboos: Why Wesleyan Epistemology Critiques Menstrually Motivated Gendered Violence - *Fillaree Chapman, The University of Notre Dame Australia.***

Taboos are deeply connected to fear and danger, arising from cultural mechanisms designed to protect against perceived threats. The word "taboo" derives from the Polynesian word tapu meaning "sacred." Amongst these cultures, menstruation (tupua) was considered potent, not polluting. Yet, while these societies considered menstruation as a sacrament to be fearfully respected, Christians often interpret menstruation as a dangerous threat to the sacred. In both scenarios, menstrual taboos illustrate cultural fears. Yet, fears are influenced by knowledge and theology, allowing for the transformation of taboos. John Wesley believed that both wilful and disavowed ignorance were threats to sanctification. In this regard, continued theological silence and lack of menstrual awareness amongst men and women alike, is arguably the polluting taboo that needs to be addressed. This paper will explore how a Wesleyan epistemology counters sexism, critiques exclusive theologies, and supports survivors. As the church engages with scripture and tradition, it must wrestle with any incongruence, including the critique of external traditions. This does not imply accepting erroneous ideas but acknowledges historical evidence of the impacts of human fallibility. Only then can the church humbly accept responsibility for relational brokenness and seek reconciliation.

Day 2.

12 Feb  
11:15 to  
1:15 pm

Chair:  
Kylie  
Crabbe

Short  
Papers  
2b

**Short Papers: Session 2c (2 papers)**

**1) Leading congregations through Metanoia: A Franciscan Approach to Systemic Change - *Heather Centragolo, Academy of Systemic Renewal***

Ancient and medieval leadership models within the Judeo-Christian tradition are, understandably, often overlooked as sources for emancipation from colonialist and patriarchal structures. However, perhaps counterintuitively, historic founders of new movements for change within these traditions, can provide positive examples of critical leadership. A growing understanding within the field of systemic change, first articulated by scientist Donella Meadows, is that the most critical leverage point for long-term, sustainable change across systems, is the change of collective mindsets or paradigms. Christian social reformers, like Francis of Assisi, who were skilled at leading communities to metanoia, are an underestimated resource. Francis of Assisi may seem an unlikely example to draw from for the emancipation of women. However, his leadership pioneered a way for the women in religious life to be financially self-sustaining and, for the first time, to have an itinerant ministry. Clare of Assisi was the first woman to ever write a Rule for her Order. Francis was a man who, whilst attending to his own process of renewal, led widespread social change from within the Catholic system, embedding a new understanding and expression of religious life into the institutional and intellectual structures of his time, in the space of twenty years. This paper presents a Franciscan pedagogy for systemic change, drawn from the example of the early Franciscan community. Specific and transferable practices are articulated, in terms of how these can be practiced and utilised to lead social change, and to prevent violence, today.

Day 2.

12 Feb  
12:15 to  
1:15 pm

Chair  
Robyn  
Whitaker

Short  
Papers  
2c

**2) Spiritually Informed Care: a source of empowerment in the face of gendered violence. - *Joan Wright Howie, Whitley College, University of Divinity***

Gendered violence is not only a social and psychological crisis but also a profoundly spiritual one that diminishes a person's sense of worth, identity, meaning, connectivity, and belonging. This session explores how spiritually informed care offers a model of engagement that empowers through mutually restorative interactions. The presentation introduces the Presence CARE model as an integrated framework for spiritual care, developed from doctoral research into the nature of spiritual care. Practising presence is a profoundly non-violent way of being that fosters a process of exploration through Curiosity, Attunement, Receptivity, and Engagement. The dimensions of CARE serve as a counterforce to the dynamics of power, domination, shame, and silencing often associated with gendered violence.

Participants will reflect on how being Curious reclaims agency, being Attuned affirms embodiment, being Receptive restores safety and trust, and when we Engage, we create a partnership for an ethical and justice-oriented solidarity of Presence.

Short  
Papers  
2c

### Short Papers: Session 3a (2 papers)

#### 1) Gendered Violence, Victim-blaming, and Purity: The Ten Handmaids of Penelope and the Ten Wives of David – *David Tombs, University of Otago, New Zealand*

This paper will explore the salient overlaps and notable differences in two short ancient texts describing gendered violence. The first is Telemachus hanging the ten handmaids of Penelope, near the end of The Odyssey (Book 22: 460-474). The ten women were accused by Eurykleia of having consorted disloyally with Penelope's suitors. The second passage is King David ordering that the ten royal wives (pilegish) he left in Jerusalem be confined for the rest of their lives (2 Sam 20:3), following the women's public violation by David's son Absalom. Victim-blaming plays an obvious and harmful role in both these passages. However, a close reading of the stories also exposes problems with the assumptions behind the victim-blaming response in both cases. The passage in The Odyssey should be read with a critical awareness of gendered power relations. The ten handmaids had limited autonomy and were highly vulnerable to coercion. In 2 Sam. 20:3, the ten women are clearly blameless for the violence they suffered from Absalom, and yet they are confined to 'living widowhood'. I suggest that Mary Douglas's classic text, Purity and Danger (1966), offers insights into the hostile and destructive responses in both cases. The issue is not so much moral blame but is shaped by perceptions of stigma, purity, and danger. Stigma readily attaches to survivors of sexual violence even when there is no moral blame. The stigma around perceived impurity in both texts can shed critical light on victim-blaming and stigma responses towards contemporary survivors of sexual violence.

#### 2) The Call Comes from Inside the House: Reading Ezekiel 16 and 23 with and against the Logic of Horror - *Caitlin Olsen*

Ezekiel 16 and 23, as apparently (and infamously) misogynistic and even pornographic texts, have problematised conservative evangelical interpretation of God's (and thus the Church's) relationship to gendered violence throughout their interpretive histories. Many existing feminist ideological critiques of these chapters foreclose any ethical evangelical reading of Ezekiel 16 and 23 by intimating that if these chapters remain Christian scripture, then the church that condones (or even uncritically accepts) them must both hate and objectify women. This paper takes seriously both the claim that Ezekiel 16 and 23 are Christian scripture, and that the texts do represent both misogyny and pornography, yet proposes that the logic of this tension functions similarly to rhetoric within contemporary horror. As a genre with its own logic concerning sex, violence, and morality, horror offers interpreters of Ezekiel 16 and 23 an evangelical hermeneutical approach that represents historical-critical realities (and resists evangelical anxieties) concerning sex and violence. This approach creates practical and pastoral space to condemn gendered and sexual violence in concert with feminist critique, while maintaining evangelical priorities concerning the biblical text's efficacy as God's authoritative revelation.

Day 2.  
12 Feb  
2:45 to  
3:45 pm

Chair  
Liz Boase

Short  
Papers  
3a

### Short Papers: Session 3b (2 papers)

#### 1) Laying foundations, increasing reach, applying learnings: 13 years of prevention work in the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne - *Rev Scott Holmes, Consultant, Member of the Committee of Management & Kerry Lewis, Program Manager.*

The Anglican Diocese of Melbourne has been delivering a Prevention of Violence Against Women (PVAW) program across the Diocese for over 13 years. Resource development, training, policy and procedures, awareness raising, and a whole-of-church model to address the drivers of violence against women are amongst the

Day 2.  
12 Feb  
2:45 to  
3:45 pm

Chair  
Gabrielle  
Hunt

many strategies used to deliver this innovative approach to shifting the culture and practices of the Diocese. The latest evaluation conducted by Melbourne University has highlighted the many achievements, learnings and ongoing challenges of this work. There has been considerable engagement and capacity building amongst church leaders, increased awareness of how to appropriately respond to family violence, and strong indications of contributing to a primary prevention mindset within and beyond the Diocese. At the same time, ongoing resistance to ideas about gender and sexism, violence supportive attitudes, and conservative theological frameworks continue to persist as significant barriers to change. The challenge of providing appropriate pastoral support when both victim and perpetrator are in the parish is also an ongoing concern. This paper will provide a brief overview of the PVAW program before focusing on the key evaluation findings in relation to sexism, exclusive theologies, and supporting survivors.

**2) Embodied Justice: A Faith-Law Understanding of Justice for Christian Women Experiencing Domestic and Family Violence. - Dr Jenny Richards, Flinders University**

Christian women experiencing domestic and family violence (DFV) may have their vulnerability increased and vindication jeopardised if the justice system is viewed as inconsistent with a 'faith response' to DFV. This harmful perspective rests on misunderstandings of how theological concepts of justice align with those of law. This paper outlines findings from Richards' doctorate, considering how an integrated faith-law approach to DFV can enable a form of justice to be experienced by Christian women which is consistent with both theological and legal understandings. It draws from Scottish theologians J.B. Torrance and T.F. Torrance's work on theological covenant, socio-political reconciliation, and onto-relations for its theological meaning of justice, and from Barbara Hudson's key principles of restorative justice: discursiveness, relationalism and reflectiveness, for much of its legal meaning. This conceptualisation of justice allows for faith norms and law to be viewed in an interrelated way, providing a corrective for the depersonalisation inherent in violence by enabling personhood, dignity and freedom to be centred within a faith-law response. This may allow for a synthesised experience of 'embodied justice' to be experienced irrespective of the precise ways in which victim/survivors may or may not choose to engage with the justice system.

Day 2.  
12 Feb  
2:45 to  
3:45 pm

Chair  
Gabrielle  
Hunt

Short  
papers  
3b

**Short Papers: Session 4a (3 papers)**

**1) Is the Bible a Safe Space? Reading the Bible when Responding to Violence - Dr Erin Martine Hutton (Australian University of Theology) & Dr Rosie Clare Shorter (The University of Melbourne)**

Christian communities are interpretive communities, gathered around the Bible and its reception (Dalwood 2019; Vanhoozer 2016). We know that the Bible can be both a source of harm and of healing (Rambo 2020, Pepper and Powell 2021). This paper explores how the Bible is received and read after violence has occurred or been disclosed. International research suggests that a mode of survival for Christians experiencing (spiritualised) abuse and (religious) coercive control is to know that there are alternative interpretations of biblical texts, and to have a level of "interpretive confidence" to understand them, apart from harmful interpretations (Sharp 2014; Paynter 2020). Australian research indicates the need to "encourage engagement with religious texts and teachings to promote gender equality" (Truong et al 2020, 3). This need persists. In our mapping of harmful and healing readings of the Bible, we seek answers for how a person moves from interpretations that contribute to harm, towards interpretations that promote safety, equity, healing and inclusion. This question informs our ongoing research project, which has received funding from ARTFInc, exploring how, and to what extent, ministry staff supporting victim-survivors read, interpret and draw on Scripture after disclosures of violence.

Day 3.  
13 Feb  
9:30 to  
11:00 am

Chair  
Steff  
Fenton

Short  
Papers  
4a

2) **Bread and Snakes - *Laura Tharion, Macquarie Anglican***

This short reflection will explore my assertion that to sufficiently recognise and respond to the endemic of gendered violence, Christian communities must challenge, change, and expand their moral imagination surrounding suffering, in particular female suffering. A moral imagination informed by a theodicy that perceives all suffering as necessary, just, and formative profoundly limits the insights, tools, and solutions Christian communities have to work with regarding understanding, identifying, and responding to gendered violence. A moral imagination informed by a culture that perceives female pain as normative and dismissible, and imaginary profoundly limits the insights, tools, and solutions Christian communities have to work with regarding understanding, identifying, and responding to gendered violence. Without new patterns of thinking, how can new practices take root? My research is informed by my experience pastoring victim-survivors of domestic violence, my ongoing quest to resource myself to recognise and respond to domestic violence, and my desire to engage in Bible teaching and discipleship which does not inadvertently enable gendered violence but rather promotes relationships modelled on trinitarian-shaped love. I hope to bring to light this failure of moral imagination and spur further research into how flimsy theodicy intersects with sexism, gender inequity, and violence, furthering the cause of seeing gendered violence within Christian communities exposed, halted, and healed.

3) **Beyond the Breakout Box: The Benefits of Genuinely Centering Survivor Voices - *Julie Marshall, Morling College, Sydney & Leigh Williams, survivor***

Academics and professionals whose work includes DFV education are increasingly aware of the importance of incorporating 'lived experience' or survivor perspectives in their work. However, too often survivor contributions seem to be added as an afterthought to the theoretical work; presented as secondary and marginal to the authoritative voice of the professional who has sought their contribution. How can we develop a more equitable and fruitful approach to working with survivors in faith-based academic/professional education settings? What is needed to assure survivors that their lived-experience expertise will be appropriately valued and respected, as well as their safety prioritised, if they agree to participate?

**Short Papers: Session 4b (Panel)**

**A New Normal: Reframing Christian Domestic and Family Violence Prevention and Response for Interdisciplinary Collaboration**

- *Dr Jenny Richards*
- *Ms Sharon Lockwood*
- *Rev Dr Joan Riley.*

We can't change what we don't acknowledge. This joint interdisciplinary, collaborative presentation brings theology, social science and law together in the task of reconceptualising religious domestic and family violence (DFV). We consider how the three disciplines have traditionally contributed to the normalisation of gender inequality which in turn enables and tolerates DFV in Christian churches and the wider community. Biblical and theological teachings which are used to enable and sanction DFV are examined alongside the four social drivers of gender-based violence and the Four Pillars framework of social conditions enabling violence. From there, we reframe understandings of coercive control and other DFV through a lens which enables its criminality and broader wrongfulness to be foregrounded rather than obscured by the theological and socio-cultural beliefs which obstruct help seeking and normalise women's subjugation.

We challenge the conceptualisation of DFV as a private matter and reframe it in part using Turiel's moral reasoning theory. Biblical and theological teachings which centre justice and human dignity, repudiate gender-based violence, and counter weaponised teachings are explored alongside congruent features of the criminal

Day 3.

13 Feb

9:30 to  
11:00 am

Chair

Steff  
Fenton

Short  
Papers

4a

Day 3.

13 Feb  
9:30 to  
11:00 am

Chair

Liz Boase

Short  
Papers

4b

justice system and the law's response to sexual offences and coercive control. Crucially, we examine existing alignment between features of the three disciplines, bringing their insights together to enable a shift away from "either/or" sector responses. Instead, we posit an integrated approach to DFV prevention and potential response.

### **Short Papers: Session 5a (3 papers)**

**1) Knowledge as Rape in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar - Dr Lexi Eikelboom, Australian Catholic University**

Feminist theologians have drawn attention to a myriad of ways that gender inequality manifests in the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar. While Balthasar is at pains to point out that his use of gendered and sexual imagery is analogical, and his defenders argue that his theological concerns can be uncoupled from his gendered categories, such defenses miss the reason that Balthasar's gendered categories are problematic. In this paper, I illustrate the problem by analyzing a particular case that has not yet been addressed in the literature on Balthasar's use of gendered concepts. In book I of the *Theologic*, Balthasar characterizes the subject as receptive feminine and the object as active masculine. The nature of their relationship is described in terms of force and, explicitly, as taking place without consent (61-77). For Balthasar, then, knowledge takes place on the model of rape, and the structure of the relationship remains one of intimate violence predicated on inequality even if we remove the gendered descriptors. Gendered violence can thus appear and be defended as a reflection of the logic of reality, even if we resist or deny this outcome. I argue that ensuring theology does not underwrite gendered violence requires an account of reality-as-relational modelled on non-violent intimacy between equals.

**2) Loving Enemies and Bearing Suffering in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* - Rev Liam Miller, Uniting Church**

Research on domestic abuse within churches revealed victims can hear appeals to the necessity to bear suffering, and offer forgiveness in order that their husband might be redeemed. While such responses are routinely condemned it does not mitigate their pervasiveness in the theological tradition. In *Discipleship*, for instance, Dietrich Bonhoeffer unflinchingly declares that entering the passion of Christ to overcome evil by love, "is the only solid foundation for the disciple's obedience." Not wishing to cede the possibility that theology can resource approaches to suffering and enemy love in the context of gendered violence, this paper turns to Anne Brontë's 1848 novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Contrary abstract theological imperatives, Brontë establishes her protagonist Helen's activity as shaped by her material reality, the shifting nature of power dynamics, necessity of confrontation, and the possibility of restoration without reconciliation. Yet, at the same time, Helen's views on redemption, duty, enemy-love, and suffering are firmly founded on her belief in God's enduring love, purifying justice, and universal salvation. Brontë bolsters the theological tradition of enemy-love, providing a nuanced narrative example of what Bonhoeffer described as the "unbearable offense" of discipleship that "demands more than the strength a natural person can muster."

**3) Modesty, Purity Culture, and Gendered Violence in Dannah Gresh's *Secret Keeper* - Jess Hall, University of Otago, Aotearoa, New Zealand**

This paper will examine how Christian modesty resources support patterns of thinking which expect and normalise gendered violence, using Dannah Gresh's *Secret Keeper: The Delicate Power of Modesty*, as an example. In *Secret Keeper* (2005), Gresh offers eight "truth or bare" fashion tests to aid teenage girls in assessing the modesty potential of their outfits. Throughout, girls are encouraged to assess their bodies as if from the male gaze, whether to anticipate sexualisation from a male viewer, or the possibility of their bodies sparking discomfort. This paper

Day 3.

13 Feb  
11:30 am  
– 1:00 pm

Chair  
Kylie  
Crabbe

Short  
Papers  
5a

proposes to trouble the rhetoric of modesty by critiquing its entanglement with ideologies such as rape culture, gender essentialism, and fatphobia, which participate in how modesty is defined. Positioned against a theological backdrop which emphasises female responsibility for purity and the visually stimulated nature of men, Gresh's fashion tests problematically suggest the threat of male attention as a valuable tool in how Christian girls evaluate what to wear. It will be discussed that this not only normalises gendered violence and positions the male gaze as authoritative but also functions to inscribe the threat of gendered violence upon girls' own understanding of their emerging sexual bodies.

Short  
Papers  
5a

### Short Papers: Session 5b (3 papers)

- 1) **Feminist reflexivity and research practices to support religious community capacity to end domestic violence - Dr Josephine Clarke and Professor Sarah Wendt (ARC Centre of Excellence for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, University of Melbourne)**

In this paper we consider the religious context to domestic violence, by drawing on feminist methodology and the concept and practices of intersectionality, to show the relations of power religion enables, and the challenges of doing research that explores this context. We do this by drawing on research conducted in partnership with Australian Christian denominations. We situate ourselves to discuss engagement with reflexivity, to then share tensions when researching religion and domestic violence. Tensions include consideration of how gender-based interpersonal violence and abuse are defined, by whom, when, and settler colonial histories and ongoing impacts. By being aware of tensions, we then discuss research intentionality to support safety and accountability, and gender equality, as part of how research practices contribute to open opportunities for healing in religious contexts.

- 2) **Beyond Growth to Agency: The Shifting and Gendered Adherence of Australian Pentecostal Women - Dr. Tanya Riches (Eastern College)**

Pentecostalism is oft-described as the fastest-growing religious movement globally. Yet these dominant "growth narratives" frequently centre the movement's charismatic male leaders, sidelining the historical and ongoing contributions of women. Scholars suggest that the appeal of mega-Pentecostalism lies in conservative theological frameworks, which emphasise strong social boundaries and traditional family roles. However, in Australia, even while sociologists continue to assert Pentecostal growth, the 2023 census data revealed a sizeable departure of women from the faith. This shift coincided with a series of global scandals involving Pentecostal male leaders, whose actions were often publicly excused or valorised. Meanwhile, the experiences of Australian Pentecostal women were rendered largely invisible, diminishing their agency in the public discourse. This paper explores the "Gender Paradox" of Australian Pentecostalism: examining a complex and at times contradictory relationship between women and their faith. When examined through the lens of gendered development outcomes, at times, women express their participation as spiritually and socially empowering. However, constraints and limitations to loyalty also emerge. Drawing on a case study of women's movement in and out of Hillsong's main campus in Sydney, analysed through development indicators outlined by Moghadam and Senftova (2005), this paper highlights complexities and tensions for Australian Pentecostal women around faith and institutional belonging.

Day 3.  
13 Feb  
11:30 am  
- 1:00 pm

Chair  
Tracy  
McEwan

Short  
Papers  
5b

3) **Safeguarding as Mission: Evidence on current barriers and what this means for prevention.** - *Dr Gabrielle Hunt, Australian Catholic University*

Child abuse within religious organisations in Australia has been an area of growing concern. While many organisations have implemented safeguards, these efforts have often failed to address the deep-rooted cultural and theological resistance to change. Through semi-structured interviews with 20 leaders from various Christian denominations, my research shed light on the current safeguarding practices in Australian religious settings. The interviews identified several key themes, particularly the challenges of shifting entrenched cultural norms that support gendered hierarchies, where male authority is often emphasised. Leaders expressed a tension between complying with safeguarding protocols and confronting theological traditions. This presentation will critically examine how Christian theologies of male headship, female submission, and original sin may contribute to cultures of child maltreatment and gendered violence within religious organisations. It will explore the ways in which theological perspectives on power, authority, and forgiveness complicate the adoption of survivor-centered safeguarding practices. In light of these findings, the presentation will offer recommendations for improving safeguarding measures, including the integration of gender-sensitive theological reflection, greater survivor and child involvement in policy development, and the need for cultural transformation within faith communities. These findings contribute to broader conversations about the role of theology in both perpetuating and counteracting gendered violence, offering insights into how religious communities might cultivate environments that prioritise justice, inclusion, and the protection of vulnerable individuals.

Day 3.

13 Feb

11:30 am  
– 1:00 pm

Chair

Tracy  
McEwan

Short  
Papers

5b